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ABSTRACT

During the 1997-98 school year, a large elementary school in the Kansas City area began to research the community learning arrangement within schools. In the early part of the second semester, teachers completed an anonymous survey in which they displayed overwhelming support for the change. Five community learning groups were established and teachers were randomly selected to serve in the communities. Each of the communities had five grades (1-5) with the exception of one group which did not have a fifth grade. With the exception of three teachers, all teachers changed classrooms the last 2 days of the school year. Three teachers remained in the same classroom. The school year began with this arrangement, and several improvements were noted. Teachers found that discipline problems were overwhelmingly down, especially violent acts. There was an observed improvement in the social skills of all students. This paper also includes information from the research on school size, the school-within-a-school concept, and learning communities. (SM)

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"RESTRUCTURING THE SCHOOLS LEARNING ARRANGEMENT INTO COMMUNITIES"

by

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DESCRIPTION OF SESSION

One of the largest elementary schools in the Mid-West makes its attempt to restructure their schools learning arrangement into learning communities to enhance the "Learning for All" effort. This effort has created a context for teaching and learning that is more stable, more supportive, and has brought about a sense of community for all students. The learning community arrangement has encouraged a coordinated, cross-disciplinary approach to instruction where teachers take a collective responsibility for their students' success.

Introduction

While there is no agreement about the numerical limits of small and large schools, on average, the research indicates that an effective size for an elementary school is in the range of 300-400 students and that 400-800 students is appropriate for a secondary school (Williams, 1990). These figures should be regarded as pushing the upper limits since many investigators conclude that no school should have more than 400 or 500 students.

Since many small schools are in rural areas, some researchers have designed studies to find out whether it is the smallness or the ruralness of these schools that accounts for their positive effects. These studies reveal that it is the smallness of schools, regardless or setting, that is beneficial to students.

WHY SMALLER IS BETTER

People in small schools come to know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools, and rates of parent involvement are higher. Staff and students are found to have a stronger sense of personal efficacy. Small-school students tend to take more of the responsibility for their own learning, learning activities are more likely to be individualized, classes are typically smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible.

Teachers are more likely to form teaching teams, integrate their subject-matter content, employ multiage grouping and cooperative learning, and use performance assessment. Finally, small schools tend to exhibit greater emphasis on learning that is experiential and relevant to the world outside of school.

SCHOOL SIZE AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

We know that the states with the largest schools and school districts have the worst achievement, affective, and social outcomes (Jewel, 1989; Walberg, 1992). We also know that the students who stand to benefit most from small schools are economically disadvantages and minority students. To put it another way, these students experience the greatest amount of harm from attending large schools (Cotton, 1996; Fowler, 1995; Howley, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1996).

If minority students must struggle more to achieve a solid public education and if large districts and large schools find it increasingly difficult to achieve solid educational results for their students, we may be acting contrary to the interests of all concerned by organizing our public education system in a manner which assigns high proportions of minority youngsters to large schools within very large school districts.

SCHOOL WITHIN A SCHOOL

In an attempt to reap at least some of the benefits of small schools, some educators and parent groups have launched school within a school arrangements, in which large schools are divided into two or more subunits.

A growing body of research suggests that school within a school plans have potential for producing results like those associated with small schools provided they are distinct administrative entities within the buildings that house them. The major challenge to schools within schools has been obtaining sufficient separateness and autonomy to permit staff members to generate a distinctive environment and to carry out their own vision of schooling (Raywid).

There is evidence to suggest that smaller schools lead to greater student success along a number of dimensions. Stockard and Mayberry (1992) offer this assessment of the research on school size and student attitudes:

> Studies of elementary students suggest that small schools provide a more humanistic learning experience ...
>
> Several studies suggest that students in small high schools are involved in a greater number and variety of activities, assume a greater number of positions of responsibility, are less alienated, and have a greater "sense of belonging" to the group than students in large schools (Huling 1980; Barker and Gump 1964; Willems 1967; Baird 1969; Peshin 1978; Turner and Thrasher 1970; Morgan and Alwin 1980; Wicker 1968, 1969; Downey 1978). These results occur in both urban and rural areas and particularly with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Holland and Andre 1987). Because of their greater involvement, those in small schools report feeling needed and challenged, that they have an important job (Willems 1967; Wicher 1968). Many studies have linked these feelings of involvement with a lower probability of dropping out of school. Students who feel more identified with their schools are much more likely to remain in school until graduation (Finn 1989). (p. 47)

Large high schools and middle schools are experimenting with schools within schools to capture the advantages ob both large and small schools in one educational setting, to allow students to connect (next page)

with school, and to expand choice while accommodating the diverse interests and goals present in most communities. Teachers with a unique vision of education have an opportunity to attempt to translate that vision into practice. Such settings create opportunities for affiliation and community-building. They can offer parents a way to have some choice regarding what type of program their child attends within the public schools.

Roderick found that students whose grades fell sharply during their freshman year were more likely to drop out of school. She concluded that "a lot of students simply find it hard to make a good transition from the lower grades, where they're given personal attention, to the large bureaucratic institutions many of our high schools have become" (cited in Hayes 1992).

Sooner or later, however, most schools-within-schools will face the problem of institutional legitimacy, particularly in environments of declining resources. In other words, which school is the "legitimate" school: the school-within-a-school, or the larger school? The experiences of such programs in the early seventies indicate that such programs are very sensitive to declines in resources in the district. Their need for very specific types of staff members comes into conflict with the district's needs to assign or reassign teachers. As cutbacks occur, the contract may dictate that teachers who do not necessarily agree with the basic premises of the school-within-a-school will be assigned to it anyway because of seniority. Pressure to revert to the "legitimate" model of education, as embodied in the remaining traditional structure, will be strong.

If schools-within-schools are attempted, several issues can affect their success. If a school-within-a-school exists in a larger educational structure that continues to be labeled as the "legitimate" or "real" school, the larger school may eventually overwhelm the smaller, more vulnerable school-within-a-school. This danger argues for a complete transition to a series of programs within one building. The new programs should be roughly equal in size and all be distinctly different from a "traditional" program, with no single program able to claim primary institutional legitimacy. One way to accomplish this transition has been demonstrated by District 4 in New York City. The district disbanded an existing school and turned over the site to a series of programs from different grade levels that had little in common other than the shared site.

Another alternative is to officially designate the school-within-a-school as the research and development center for the building or district. Staff within the larger school site (or district at large) agree that

new practices developed and tested at the school-within-a-school that prove to be successful will eventually be implemented in the larger school (or the district). Such a caveat is likely to increase staff interest in the goings-on in the school-within-a-school significantly, as well as to establish a clearer relationship between the school-within-a-school and the rest of the educational environment.

The designation of a school-within-a-school as an R & D center has another benefit. It creates a place where teachers can observe and be trained in new teaching techniques before implementing them in their "regular" classrooms. The concentration of resources, such as new technologies or adequate staff development funds, in such a center can allow educators to develop and experiment with new techniques in a cost-effective manner. Such a school also shows parents that new programs are being carefully developed and tested under controlled conditions.

Since enrollment in such a school would be voluntary, it is likely that those involved with the schools would be open to new approaches. The smaller size of the R&D center would allow staff to develop a close working relationship with parents and to solicit parents' feelings about new programs and techniques that may be piloted at the center. This involvement would also provide an indication of the kinds of issues that may be raised by those in the traditional program when the new techniques are implemented there.

One of the dangers of schools-within-schools is that they often become dumping grounds for the unwanted, the difficult-to-teach, or the "at-risk" student. While these students certainly need educational environments in which their needs are addressed, there is little to suggest that concentrating these students in one location is preferable to allowing them to interact with a wider range of young people.

At the other end of the spectrum are schools-within-schools that become elite programs. Experience suggests that when one such program gains a reputation as being "better" than the rest of the school, there is pressure to disband it because of the subtle (or not so subtle) competition for students and the social ranking that begins to occur. The tendency is for some to insist that norms of mediocrity be enforced on all aspects of the school equally and that the "elite" program be disbanded. A better result would be that the program serve as a catalyst for the rest of the school to improve. That will require a remaking of the culture of the school and the incorporation of new norms regarding professional relations. As has been noted frequently throughout this book, the difficulty of such changes should not be underestimated.

CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The premise behind all schemes for breaking down large, complex organizations into smaller subunits is that such structures will allow more opportunities for human interaction and affiliation to occur. In other words, the potential that a strong sense of community will develop is enhanced. This sense of community appears to be an important dimension of student learning, particularly for at-risk students.

The Holweide School in Cologne, Germany, has been cited as an example of a school in which the conditions of the learning environment have been altered to bring about new relationships between students and teachers and to create a learning community. Group membership is a key concept in this school.

The Holweide School is composed of schools-within-schools of approximately ninety students each. The staff base their organizational model on personalizing education for the fifth- through tenth-grade students in the school. Their two key goals are to diminish anonymity and to allow students of varying backgrounds to work together. The groups of ninety students and six teachers stay together for six years. The groups of ninety are further broken down until ultimately a student ends up as a member of a "table group" comprising five or six students. This group remains stable for a year or more.

Students are trained in the best methods of working together as a team. Twice a year groups consult with their tutors to assess their progress and their personal contributions. These meetings often take place at the tutor's home, over breakfast. The table groups develop common offcampus experiences and projects, which may involve them in social issues in the neighborhoods surrounding the school. Ratzki (1989/1990) describes the learning environment at Holweide School:

> We assign students to table-groups of five or six members integrated by sex, ability, and ethnic origin. Within these "social unit" groups, the children tutor and encourage each other. The difference between our groups and cooperative learning groups is that our children stay in these same groups for every subject, normally for at least a year. The aim is to promote stable groups in which the members learn to work together despite their individual differences. To achieve good group results, each member is responsible not only for his or her own work but also for that of the other members. If the work of one child in the group is unsatisfactory or his or her behavior a problem, then we try to discuss the issue with the individual child as well as the group....
>
> Each table-group meets once a week to discuss any problems or to suggest improvements in their every day working situations.

> During lessons, except for free learning periods, the group practices and works things out *together*. Students who are more able are expected to help the other members in their group. Since the teacher's time is limited, this *helper system* is of great benefit. (p. 48, emphasis in original)

Differences among students are recognized through individual learning activities, such as techniques in learning how to learn:

> Each school week begins with a discussion circle. For this event, the students move their tables aside, and those who wish to can tell about something special or interesting that happened to them over the weekend. After these remarks, the tutors announce any special events in the coming week. Next, the tutors present the weekly plan, which structures each student's work for the upcoming days. They also write the individual obligatory tasks for their subjects on the board, which the students copy into their plan books. Each student then checks his or her plan for the previous week and copies any unfinished exercise into the new plan. As teachers for other subjects come into the classroom, the plans are added to....
>
> The circular discussion group format is also used for certain lessons. For example, during *tutorial lessons*, students discuss any problems with the tutors and how these can be solved. The students themselves determine the agenda for these lessons; the teacher plays a passive role. Each person in the discussion group who has just spoken in turn chooses the next speaker, irrespective of whether students or teachers have expressed their wish to voice an opinion. Coming from traditional schools, where teachers have an almost absolute right to speak whenever they wish, many teachers find that this format requires some getting used to. (Ratzki 1989/90, pp. 49-50, emphasis in original)

Teachers do not play a passive role in constructing the learning environment. They must make many decisions and take responsibility for creating the structures and content that allow students to engage in learning successfully:

> Teachers in Holweide have a great deal of autonomy. Between them, they teach all the subjects and are responsible for the education of three groups of 28 to 30 students. They form their own teams of 6 to 8 members; devise schedules for the coming year; choose who will teach which subjects in which classes; decide how the curriculum will be taught (in a single period or longer block of time, for example); cover for absent colleagues; and organize lunchtime activities, parents involvement, field trips, and many other concerns. They also decide among themselves which two people will work together as *class tutors* (home class, or home room, teachers) in a given class. (Ratzki 1989/90, p. 48, emphasis in original)

Other descriptions of organizational structures designed to increase student affiliation and construction of learning experiences contain

similar elements. Nickle and others (1990), in their description of a school-within-a-school, make reference to increased sense of community and affiliation as program outcomes:

> Another aspect of the program that has proved successful is "personalization".... Because the four [teacher] coaches are responsible for a total of only 80 students, the students get to know us and one another better than would be the case in a regular school. An unexpected rapport has developed within the [School-Within-A-School] SWS....
>
> A final beneficial aspect of the structure of the SWS is that students have developed a sense of "ownership" of the program. Those who interfere with learning are prodded into remembering why they are in school. The students usually reprimand and cajole their peers kindly, but such pressure is far more effective than an admonition from the instructor. Students also help one another freely and easily. As one student put it, "We can better explain things to one another because we speak the same language, and we aren't embarrassed to ask one another questions about things we don't understand." (p. 150)

Lewis (1991) describes how one middle school faculty moved to a school-within-a-school structure that would enable its members to create different blocks of time within the school for different subgroups of students. The structure would facilitate teacher planning as well. The goal was to enhance the quantity of content teachers were able to teach:

> Discussions on high content piqued the Frick teachers' interest in interdisciplinary teaching. This led to a decision to go for teaming and to create "castles," in which groups of students stay together all day with a team of core teachers. By dividing the school into castles, teachers obtained common planning time, flexibility to schedule block periods, and closer relationships with students.... Organizing the teams required a massive moving day as teachers regrouped from subject-matter departments to castles. "That ruffled a few feathers," says Donna Blochwitz, perhaps Frick's most enthusiastic supporter of teams....
>
> June Jackson, principal at Frick when the castles were formed, found the process of organizing and starting the teams difficult for teachers at first. "It takes time and training for people to learn to work together," she explains. "Some relish an opportunity to change; for others, it is quite painful, even though they are stagnating." (pp. 50-51)

Descriptions of programs such as these suggest that viable learning communities can be created within larger organizational structures, if careful thought is given regarding their relationship to the larger structure. Such environments can serve to do more than simply retain students in school. They can be places where enhanced social affiliation and greater learning occurs.

RESTRUCTURING THE SCHOOL - Oak Grove Elementary School

During the 1997-98 school year Oak Grove Elementary School, one of the largest elementary schools in the Kansas City Area began to discuss and research the community learning arrangements within schools. Oak Grove Elementary School in the Turner Unified School District houses over 650 elementary students in grades PK - 5 in two buildings.

In the early part of the second semester of school three teachers and the principal set down and began discussing the possibility of researching this effort. The teachers were presented a survey which they completed anonymously. We found overwhelming support for the change and presented this effort to the staff, school board, and superintendent of schools. After much discussion, gathering research, holding two community meetings, and making a presentation to the school board Oak Grove received approval from both the superintendent and school board to restructure Oak Grove. We established five community learning groups and selected the teachers to serve in these communities. This was done randomly and teachers were given a choice of changing if they could find another teacher to switch with.

What took place then was to establish five community groups in Oak Grove, each community had five grades, including grades one through five with the exception of one group not having a fifth grade because of the number of sections. The kindergarten and pre-school arrangements were left intact.

With the exception of three teachers all teachers changed classrooms the last two days of the school year. Three teachers remained in the same classroom. One because of a handicapping condition and two others because of the random selection of teachers for each community.

The school year began with this arrangement and several improvements have been noted. Discipline appears to be down overwhelmingly, especially with violent acts. We have also observed an improvement in the social skills areas among all students.

RATIONALE
for
COMMUNITIES AT OAK GROVE

- **Decrease discipline**
- **Increase student attendance rate**
- **Security (sense of belonging)**
- **Small school feeling**
- **Decrease drop - out rate for Oak Grove students when they reach high school**
- **Less missed students (students falling through the cracks)**
- **Curriculum awareness (across grade levels)**
- **Opportunity for professional development**
  - **exposed to different teachers**
  - **expand ideas**
  - **increase resource base**
- **Allow easier implementation of:**
  - **New strategies**
  - **Peer mediation**
  - **Second Step**
  - **Buddy Reading**

RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS

Approximately 650 students in grades PK - 5

PK - Half day with (2) sections (a morning and afternoon) with about 20 students in each section.

K - Half day with (5) sections (3 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon)

1st grade - Last year: (1) hallway with (5) sections.
This year grades 1, 2, 3, and 4 in this hallway.

2nd grade - Last year: (1) hallway with (5) sections.
This year grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in this hallway.

3rd grade - Last year: (1) hallway with (5) sections.
This year grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in this hallway.

4th grade - Last year: (1) hallway with (5) sections.
This year grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in this hallway.

5th grade - Last year: (1) hallway with (4) sections.
This year grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in this hallway.

This restructuring was brought about by the staff and the teachers names were randomly selected to decide which community they would be in.

Research Abstract: Raywid, Mary Anne, "Small Schools: A Reform that Works, Educational Leadership 55, 4 (December 1997/January 1999, pp. 34-39.

In addition to superior student achievement, the author says small schools have other benefits:

- Minority and lower-achieving students seem to benefit the most from the small school environment. Advantaged students, according to some research, are least affected by school size.
- Small schools tend to be more violence free than large ones.
- Students in small schools are generally better behaved.
- The dropout rate for students in small schools is lower.
- The environment of a small school seems to have a greater impact on students' personal habits (such as smoking and alcohol/drug use, aspirations (such as future plans and goals), and post-high school behavior (i.e., college attendance).
- Researchers have identified eight features of small schools which account for their success. In contrast to large schools, these include the following:
    - Small schools operate on a more human scale.
    - Small schools have more satisfied and willing students.
    - Small schools have more committed teachers.
    - Small schools offer opportunities for choice.
    - Small schools often have a focus or mission.
    - Small schools are free to operate autonomously and without a bureaucracy.
    - Small schools are much more responsive to their constituents.
    - Small schools offer better matches to both students and their families.

Research Abstract: Oxley, Diana, "Organizing Schools Into Small Units: Alternatives to Homogeneous Grouping." Phi Delta Kappan. Vol. No. 7, March 1994, pp. 521-526.

"Today, high schools in the United States often enroll as many as 3,000 students. Yet schools this large are difficult to defend on educational grounds. Research indicates that large school size adversely affects attendance, school climate, and student involvement in school activities..." (p. 521) Instead, the author proposes organizing schools into small sub-units to serve all students better and, especially, to provide improved academic instruction for special needs and remedial students. "My purpose ... (in this article) is to describe an approach to small-unit organization that provides alternatives to the practices of sorting students and grouping homogeneously," says Oxley. "Since this approach challenges deeply rooted educational methods, I also discuss some of the ways that educators have overcome professional and political obstacles to reform." (p. 522)

These schools incorporate structural features of small-unit design that have come to be associated with greater teacher knowledge of students, a sense of community among students, and higher rates of attendance and academic achievement.

The author proposes "dividing large schools into small units or subschools ... (in order to create) a context for teaching and learning that is more stable, more intimate, and more supportive ... Organizing schools by units encourages a coordinated, cross-disciplinary approach to instruction (and the adults take collective responsibility for their students success ... Small-unit organization also has the potential to bring about significant changes in the traditional shape of school governance ... (because they) lend themselves to a decentralized system ..." (P. 522)

SMALL SCHOOLS

From Neglect to 'Rallying Point'

To the Editor:

I really appreciated Andrew Rotherham's Commentary ("When It Comes to School Size, Smaller Is Better," *Feb. 24, 1999*). School size has long been neglected at the policymaking level. Fortunately, though, it has become a rallying point for groups of teachers struggling to create new professional-learning communities. They see schools as something distinct from buildings, places where teachers can collaborate and where kids are visible and known by their interests and through their work.

Since 1991, our small-schools workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago and other groups in Chicago's Small Schools Coalition have helped more than 70 small public schools in the city come into existence. There is also a small-schools department and World Wide Web site at the school board's central office and support from the teachers' union Quest Center.

Chicago now has over 100 small, effective learning communities, many started by teachers. They take different forms—new start-up schools and charters, mini-schools and academies within big high schools, and a multiplex of small schools. Several schools on academic probation are also using small schools as a turn-around strategy, a way of getting at whole-school change.

The results have been impressive. These schools generally outperform the bigger schools by most measures of student achievement. They are generally safer and are often sources of teacher and parent satisfaction.

For districts and communities contemplating new school construction, we have developed a video, "Big Schools, Big Problems," with the help of Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Jeff Spitz. For more information, research, and support, our Web address is: www.uic.edu/depts/educ/ssw/homeroom.html.

Thanks again to Mr. Rotherham for raising small schools as a vital policy issue.

Michael Klonsky
Director
Small Schools Workshop
University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, Ill.

To the Editor:

In his Commentary on school size, Andrew Rotherham writes: "In fact, the research is pretty clear on this point: Smaller schools help promote learning. And, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, research shows that small schools are able to offer a strong core curriculum."

It occurred to me while reading this essay that the movement to statewide and even national standards for students (and teachers) is an attempt to make one large school for the whole country. Has anyone considered whether this is the best thing to do? How do we make space for regional, local, and individual differences? Is it possible for a one-size-fits-all educational system to really fit everyone?

Lin McMullin
Ballston Spa, N.Y.

Education Week